

P'yongyang: Then and Now

My four brothers and I were all born and brought up in P'yongyang. These past few days, therefore, I have been glued to TV and newspaper coverage of the Red Cross talks and am seized with an acute case of nostalgia. In this weakened condition how can I resist the request of The Korea Times for some scattered reminiscences on P'yongyang then and now?

I watched the progress of the Red Cross motorcade north through Kaesong and Sariwon, waiting breathlessly for the first sight of my old home town. Back in 1898 my father posted a record for the fastest bicycle trip along that winding, rutted road, ~~xxxxxxx~~ P'yongyang to Seoul in two days! He wouldn't believe pictures of the asphalt highway. But suddenly, on TV, there was P'yongyang. And I didn't believe it either, at first.

I should have known. "You can't go home again". After all, I hadn't seen the city since 1934.

The pictures on the papers and on TV were out of another world. When I came back to Korea in 1955 I used to drive up to Panmunjom now and then to gaze across the Bridge of No Return and imagine that I could see the house where I was born, only about one hundred miles away. Only a hundred miles, but in reality my home was farther away from me than the moon.

I hear that they have torn down the old house where we lived. In appearance it was something like the present

P'yongyang 2 2 2 2 2 2

American Ambassador's residence but on a much smaller scale--tile roof, immense pine rafters, mud-plastered walls. It cost father twenty cartloads of cash to build it after he had moved to P'yongyang in 1893. The P'yongyang copies of ~~that~~ the 1919 Declaration of Independence were printed secretly in a storehouse in the lower part of our ~~yard~~ yard there.

Only occasionally did I see anything in the pictures of today's P'yongyang that struck a sudden chord of memory. One such was a shot of the old Potong-mun Gate, which is still standing. I remember it as in good sledding distance in winter down the hill from our house.

We lived outside the West Gate, inside an old outer wall along the ridge above the little Potong River. The mission houses are long gone. In fact, the communists built their large, marble capitol building where I remember the Bernheisel house used to stand. My brother, Dr. Howard F. Moffett, M.D., now at the Presbyterian Medical Center in Taegu, was with the Fifth Air Force during the Korea War and entered P'yongyang in the push north after the Inchon landings in 1950. Excited to find such a handsome, potential hospital standing right on Mission property he broke in on a startled officer at Army headquarters in a brave but futile attempt to claim the whole Capitol complex in the name of the Presbyterian Mission. I understand that the building was destroyed by bombs after the UN withdrawal.

Next to our house was the residence for single

P'yongyang 3 3 3 3 3 3

lady missionaries. For years it was the home of Dr. Margaret Best, one of the founders of Seung-Lui Girls High School, now relocated in Seoul on Nam-san. In P'yongyang in 1950 my brother was surprised to find that ~~Miss Best's~~ the single ladies' house had been shockingly transformed into the private residence of Premier Kim Il-Sung, completely equipped even to a fifty-foot-deep bomb shelter.

The most unreal part of the news pictures of P'yongyang today are the broad, empty, paved streets. It was such a happy, busy, bustling town when I was a boy, a city of narrow streets and familiar smells and graceful gates, a warm confusion of bull-carts and trolley cars and bicycles, and people swarming everywhere with irresistibly good-humoured energy. Now it seems all square and squat and empty and joyless. The salt and the light have gone out of it.

P'yongyang had the most beautiful women and the best ~~gooks~~ kuksu and the fastest-growing churches in the world. It also boasted one of the most memorable landscapes under heaven, the view from Peony Point (Moran-bong). When Jack London was in Korea covering the Russo-Japanese War for the San Francisco Chronicle, my father took him up to Peony Point. The already famous author of The Call of the Wild looked out through the pines across the broad river to the fields and blue mountains beyond, and shook his head and said, "I've been all over the world and I would put this at the top ^{or near it,} of any list of the most
/A

P'yongyang 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4

beautiful sights I have ever seen". But I am greatly afraid that famous view has not been improved by the long rows of block-like apartment buildings stretching along the river bank upriver from the Taedong-mun Gate toward the Point. I am willing to suspend judgment until I find out how much that development has improved the people's housing, for people are more important than views--but I would hope that the one could be ~~praxx~~ served without destroying the other.

Across the Potong-mun road (is this what they now call Chollima Boulevard?) from our house was the campus of Soongsil College (now Soongjon University in Seoul), the first school in Korea to grant college-level degrees. I remember dimly the shouting and tumult of the students in 1919 when the school became a center of the Independence demonstrations, and later and more clearly I recall the equally loud shouting and tumult on campus the day Soongsil Academy, against all odds, won the Japanese Empire soccer championship to the delirious delight of all Koreans. Korean squads were never again invited to compete in that tournament. Some say that the new revolutionary Kim Il-Sung University now occupies the campus; others place that school nearer Peony Point. ~~xxxxxxkxkx~~ The Red Cross delegates were not able to visit the location so I am not yet sure just what ^{historic} has happened to the ^{old} school.

I am even more concerned about what has happened to the churches. Where are they? When I was a boy P'yongyang was called "the city of churches". Why are they all gone without a trace today?

P'yongyang 5 5 5 5 5 5

I studied with great interest the newspaper picture of the ornate Children's Palace in P'yongyang. On that very spot once stood the Central Presbyterian Church of P'yongyang, my father's old church, and for years the largest Christian church in ^{all} Korea. If you have read The Martyred you will remember Richard Kim's sensitive descriptions of the church and its congregation and tormented pastor during the days of the Korea War. It was the birthplace of the independence of the Korean church as it passed from missionary control to self-support and self-government in 1907. That was the year Kil Son-ju, later famed as the leading Christian signer of the Declaration of Independence, became the first ordained, installed Korean pastor of a Korean church. His church, Central Presbyterian, hived off clusters of congregations all over the north, and sent Korean missionaries as far away as to Shantung, China.

"What has happened to the church in the north," reporters asked Kang Ryang-Uk, in an interview reported in The Korea Times, the first direct interview with a professing ~~North Korean~~ Christian in North Korea for more than twenty years.

Mr. Kang should know the answer to that question. He is reportedly an uncle of Premier Kim Il-Sung and chairman of the "National Unification Democratic Front", but he is also a former pupil of my father's and was once an assistant pastor of that same Central Presbyterian Church of P'yongyang. Now seventy years old, he was ordained an elder in the West Gate Church near our house. But all he could say in answer to the

P'yongyang

6 6 6 6 6 6 6

question about the churches was a weak protest, "They were all bombed out by U.S. bombers". Seoul was destroyed, too, in the war, and many of its churches bombed out. But ~~they~~ Seoul preserved its ~~was built again; because there was~~ freedom of religion ~~in~~ and they were built again. South Korea. If there is really freedom of religion in the north, as Kang insisted, why does Seoul today have some 1500 Christian churches, and P'yongyang, "the city of churches" have none?

Samuel Hugh Moffett
Presbyterian Theological Seminary
Seoul
September 7, 1972